Perspectives on Knowledge Management

… from APQC Conference – May 2002

Knowledge Management Goal:
Connecting people to the best practices, knowledge, and expertise they need to create value.
Knowledge Management Definition:
Systematic approaches to help information and knowledge emerge and flow to the right people at the right time to create value – Carla O'Dell

---

…from a speech by Laura Bush to OECD in Paris on 5/14/2002

"A former President of the United States said that where knowledge spreads, wealth spreads; and to diffuse knowledge in the world is to diffuse wealth in the world.
Those words were spoken by President Rutherford B. Hayes on May 15, 1878, and they are as true today as they were 124 years ago.
Those who acquire knowledge have a better opportunity to acquire wealth, and the truly knowledgeable human being also desires to be a better neighbor, citizen and student of the world"……

… from What is Knowledge Management - A background document to the World Development Report, World Bank, October, 1998

There is no agreed definition of "knowledge management", even among practitioners. The term is used loosely to refer to a broad collection of organizational practices and approaches related to generating, capturing, disseminating know-how and other content relevant to the organization's business.
Some would argue that "knowledge management" is a contradiction in terms, being a hangover from an industrial era when control modes of thinking were dominant. Thus knowledge is not just an explicit tangible "thing", like information, but information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection. Knowledge involves the full person, integrating the elements of both thinking and feeling. Hence some object to the implicit suggestion in the use of the term "knowledge management" that knowledge can be so managed, as revealing a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge.
Many practitioners increasingly see "knowledge sharing" as a better description of what they are about than "knowledge management". Others would prefer to emphasize "learning", since the real challenge in implementing knowledge management is less in the "sending" and more in the "receiving", particularly the processes of sense making, understanding, and being able to act upon the information available.
Overall, whatever the term employed to describe it, knowledge management is increasingly seen, not merely as the latest management fashion, but as signaling the development of a more organic and holistic way of understanding and exploiting the role of knowledge in the processes of managing and doing work, and an authentic guide for individuals and organizations in coping with the increasingly complex and shifting environment of the modern economy.

Knowledge Management Defined

How much time do the people in our organizations spend looking for information? Knowledge management can change this search time into highly effective work time. Knowledge management is one of those ephemeral terms that seem to mean nothing and everything simultaneously. During the past couple of years, it has been variously identified with document management, business intelligence, collaborative computing, corporate portals, and any number of buzzwords. But rather than a single product, **knowledge management encompasses a business strategy aimed at taking advantage of a company's existing base of information, experience, and expertise.**

In its October 1998 background document on knowledge management for the World Development Report, the World Bank recognized the strategic importance of this topic. "Whatever the term employed to describe it, knowledge management is increasingly seen, not merely as the latest management fashion, but as signaling the development of a more organic and holistic way of understanding and **exploiting the role of knowledge in the processes of managing and doing work**, and an authentic guide for individuals and organizations in coping with the increasingly complex and shifting environment of the modern economy."

The need for a definition

"Ambiguous terms can be an enormous obstacle to reaching a shared understanding." Writing on the need for creating definitions for an emerging field, Mike Uschold continues to note that "disparate backgrounds, languages, tools and techniques are a major barrier to effective communication among people, organizations and systems".

Knowledge management is both an ambiguous term and an emerging field. These two, simple words are too easy to (mis)understand. Knowledge management practitioners hail from diverse backgrounds, from information technology to organizational development to library science. Coming from broad ranging professions, from business strategist to systems analyst to entrepreneur, all are intent on applying their expertise to a discipline that is both challenging in its complexities and significant in its potential. A working definition is needed that will create the shared understanding upon which a successful knowledge management program can be built.

A working definition of knowledge

Sometimes we can solve a problem, make a decision or perform some task because we **know what** is the correct solution, alternative or behavior; we have the **information** we need to act. Sometimes we **know how** to solve that problem, make that decision or perform that task; we have the **knowledge** we need to be successful. Sometimes we **know who** can help us with the solution, decision or task; we can identify the **expert** and the **expertise** we need to get the right answers.

Knowing **what**, **how** and **who** in support of the key processes and strategies of an enterprise is the **knowledge** of interest to **knowledge management**.

Types of knowledge

This **"what**, **how** and **who"** is sometimes fully documented, written down, communicated or recorded in some **explicit** format. Other times, it is just in our heads, an understanding that we possess in some **tacit** way, based on our **experience** or **learning**. In most organizations, about 20% of the knowledge required for the successful operation of that organization is explicit, the remaining 80% are tacit.

Knowledge management deals with these two types of knowledge, **tacit** and **explicit**. It often seeks to make the **tacit** knowledge of an individual or group **explicit**, so that it can be more readily shared with others. As new knowledge is acquired, it becomes part of the **tacit** knowledge base of the learner who subsequently adapts it and applies it as needed to solve new problems, make new decisions or perform new tasks. With experience and continued learning, the **tacit** knowledge matures and evolves into new knowledge, which remains **tacit** within the individual or group until they document it in some fashion, making it **explicit**.

The 'management' of knowledge

The **management** of this knowledge consists of the application of the normal management functions - planning, design, supervision and reporting - to the processes that **identify**, **collect**, **adapt**, **organize**, **apply**, **share** and **create** this knowledge. The management of knowledge for an enterprise attends to these core **knowledge management processes** as well as to the organizational **enablers** of these processes, viz., the **leadership**, **culture**, **technology** and **measurement** required for support of these processes.

A definition of knowledge management

At its 4th Annual Conference on Knowledge Management held in Washington, D.C. in May 2002, the American Productivity and Quality Association (APQC) echoed the sentiments spoken by Mrs. Bush when it defined the goal of KM:

Connecting people to the best practices, knowledge, and expertise they need to create value.
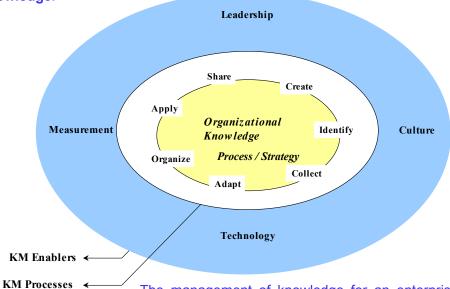
Similarly, the objective of KM as a value creating strategy is reflected in the definition of KM that we will adopt for use by USAID:

Systematic approaches to help information and knowledge emerge and flow to the right people at the right time to create value.

Knowledge Management Framework

The **management** of knowledge consists of the application of the normal management functions - planning, design, supervision and reporting - to the processes that: **identify, collect, adapt, organize, apply, share** and **create knowledge**.

Leadership

Share

Create

Apply

Measurement

Organizational Knowledge

Identify

Culture

Organize

Process / Strategy

Collect

Adapt

Technology

KM Enablers ←

KM Processes ←

APQC KM Framework

The management of knowledge for an enterprise attends to these core **knowledge management processes** as well as to the organizational **enablers** of these processes, viz., the **leadership**, **culture**, **technology** and **measurement** required for support of these processes.